

More pets than kids: lonely Japanese seek creature comfort

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Japan's demographic problems — an ageing society, a low birth-rate and a declining population — are well known. Less well known are the ways people are finding to combat the loneliness of life in a shrinking country. I went back to Japan to see how it had changed since I lived there in the early Nineties for my new book, *Alone in Japan*. Walking the streets of Tokyo, one of the most striking things I noticed was the number of dogs being wheeled about in prams, often dressed in hats, booties and sunglasses.

Japan's pet boom is said to have started in 2000, after a popular TV commercial that featured a chihuahua in a suit and tie. Just as the Vitality life insurance advert featuring Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill fuelled a craze for dachshunds in the UK, an ad for the Japanese consumer finance company AIFUL prompted a fashion for chihuahuas.

Three of the smallest breeds of dog — chihuahua, miniature dachshund and toy poodle — account for half of all puppy sales in Japan. This is partly because Japanese apartments are famously small, and partly down to the Japanese love of all things kawaii (cute).

The pet boom is closely allied to its baby bust, so the blurring of the boundary between human and animal is understandable. Its birth-rate is not quite the lowest in the world, but in 1974 Japan became the first country to drop below 2.1 children per woman, the rate required to maintain a steady population. Fifty years on, the consequences are clear to see. Last year, the number of Japanese citizens fell by more than 900,000. That's the equivalent of losing a city the size of Leeds.

Japan was also the first country in the world in which pets outnumbered children — about 16 million to 14 million. Gather its 6.8 million dogs and nine million cats in one place and they would form its second largest city. The environmentally conscious argue that fewer humans is good for the planet. Be that as it may, population decline is not a benign process. With a rising number of single people, a rising number of people living alone and a rising number of elderly people, Japan is becoming a worryingly solitary place to be.

Many pet owners are elderly people who bought a cat or dog as a substitute

for the grandchildren they never had. However, pet ownership is highest among Japan's twentysomethings, the demographic that has always been expected to bear and raise the next generation. Of course, plenty of young pet owners also have children, but for many, their pet is a substitute for the children they may never have.

When Paul Hansen, an anthropologist, asked Japanese pet owners why they decided to get a furry companion, the most common reason they gave was the breakdown or end of a human relationship. What stayed with me, however, was his discovery that dog and cat owners tended to have more photos of their pets on the walls than of family or friends.

Japan has no tradition of owning pets. Maybe that is because there was not enough room. Space has always come at a premium in Japanese cities, and urban animal lovers were more likely to keep caged insects. Pet ownership was not common in the countryside either. Unlike most countries, Japanese farming has never been based on livestock breeding — no sheep or cattle meant no need for dogs.

The pet boom is part of a global explosion in the number of domestic cats and dogs. If the domestic dogs of the world were put on a giant weighing machine, they would tip the scales at 20 million tonnes, a figure just shy of the combined biomass of the world's wild land mammals.

Over the past 30 years, plenty of surveys have been conducted to find out why Japanese people have become as reluctant to reproduce as the famously shy pandas in Ueno Zoo. The two main reasons are the high cost of raising and educating a child and the advanced state of trepidation with which they view the future of their country. Japan has seen next to no economic growth for the past 30 years.

With millions of would-be parents too poor to raise a family, and with no one to spend their disposable income on, the unwitting beneficiaries of this malaise are the nation's cats and dogs. For the pets of Japan, at least, it is a great time to be alive.

Alone in Japan: A Journey to the Future by Tom Feiling will be published on February 26